

Destination:

Neosho to Prairie State Park

The look of the plains, the feel of the past

Each issue, the *Pathways* staff chooses a notable destination and explores the paths that lead to it, spotlighting attractions, points of interest and oddities along the way.

After all, getting there is half the adventure.

By Pam Droog

The southwest corner of Missouri is full of hidden surprises. Drive for miles down two-lanes or gravel roads, walk along winding paths or go inside unassuming buildings to see some extraordinary sights. You just have to know where to look in this land of mining and history, religion and imagination.



Thomas Hart Benton

The city of Neosho, population 10,500, is a good example. Located in the vicinity of lead and zinc mines that thrived in the late 19th century, Neosho once was the strawberry capital of the world until federal water projects and refrigerated train cars shifted production to California. The birthplace of artist Thomas Hart Benton, Neosho is known as the Flower Box City, a legacy of a 1955 city beautification project that's now in its 47th year. It's also called the City of Springs because several natural springs come together here. A good place for spring viewing is scenic Big Spring Park, tucked into a hillside three blocks west of the town square.

Neosho's springs also are the reason the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Fish Hatchery, 520 E. Park St., was established here in 1888. The oldest of the nation's 65 operating hatcheries, the 17-acre Neosho facility produces 225,000 rainbow trout annually.

Assistant Hatchery Manager Roderick L. May explains that the fish eggs arrive every other month from Montana by Federal Express. The trout hatch and grow in several long tanks inside the main building. When they reach three inches long, they're transferred outdoors to spring-fed raceways. When they grow to 10 inches, they're shipped out to Lake Taneycomo or lakes in Kansas and Iowa.

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Roderick May and a really big trout at the National Fish Hatchery

Though not that easy to find, the hatchery is a popular tourist attraction May says, that draws 40,000 visitors a year.

"Anyone who stops in Neosho for a burger gets sent over here," he says.

Visitors also are likely to be sent to the Missouri/Oklahoma line to witness a well-documented but unexplained phenomenon: the Hornet (or Joplin) Spook Light. Natives and seekers of the unusual know where to find it, but here are the directions for you:



The Hornet Spook Light south of Joplin has attracted viewers for decades



Grand Falls outside Joplin



"Talking" George Washington Carver statue at the Carver National Monument

Take Route 60 west to Route 43 north at Seneca. Turn left on Gum Road, then left on State Line Road. Travel less than a half-mile then turn right on E50, known as Farm Road or Spook Light Road. Go about a half-mile, park and wait.

If you're lucky, between 10 p.m. and midnight you'll see an orange-red, basketball-size glowing orb that's been described as floating, bouncing, skipping, zipping, hovering and darting. If you approach it, it vanishes. This unsolved mystery was first noted more than 100 years ago by pioneers traveling through on wagon trains. Various theories of the light's origin include swamp gas, car lights (though sightings predate automobiles), subatomic particles and electromagnetic energy from underground mines.

Then there are the legends: the lamp of a missing miner, a headless Indian searching for his top, the soul of an Osage chief killed nearby and, of course, the spirit of an Indian



maiden who drowned herself when her warrior lover was killed in battle.

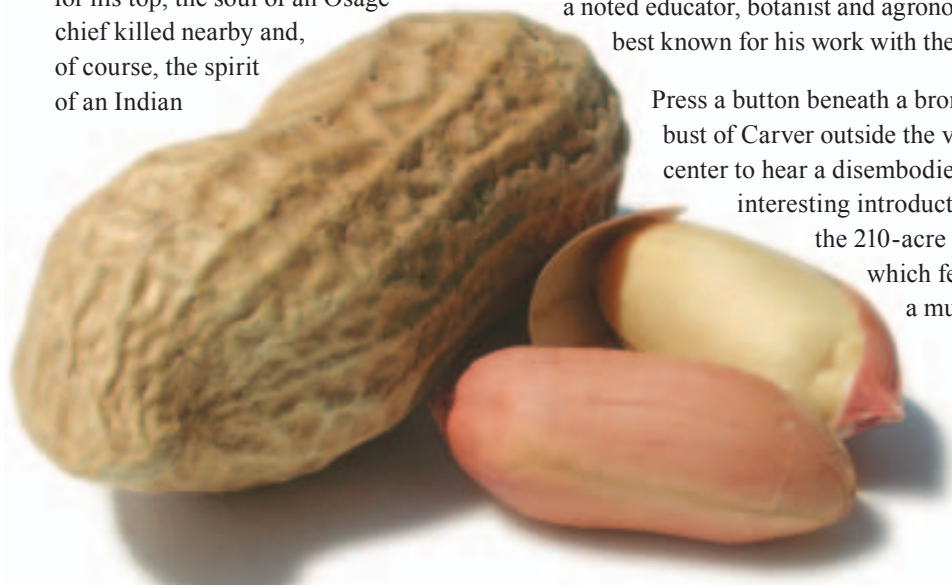
Back down to earth, take Route 71 north to Route V east to the George Washington Carver National Monument near Diamond. Operated by the National Park Service, this fascinating and serene site was the boyhood home of Carver, a former slave who became a noted educator, botanist and agronomist, best known for his work with the peanut.

Press a button beneath a bronze bust of Carver outside the visitors' center to hear a disembodied but interesting introduction to the 210-acre park, which features a museum

and Discovery Center for kids. An easy, three-quarter-mile trail winds past Carver's birth site and childhood home, the family cemetery and a prairie restoration area. Round a bend and there's a wonderful statue of Carver as a boy, set in the woods.

"We're so off the beaten path it surprises me so many people come here," volunteer Flo Hughes says of the 70,000 annual visitors.

From Diamond, it's a short trip to see another off-the-beaten-path attraction. Actually, you'll hear it before you see it – Grand Falls, the only continuously flowing waterfall in Missouri. To get there, from Diamond return to Route 71 north to Interstate 44. Get off at Route 86 south to Glendale Road and turn west. Cross Shoal Creek on Jackson, turn right on Murphy and drive 1.1 miles. Before you lies a strange, sculpted landscape of terraces and pools. Just 15 feet high, the crashing water sounds as huge as Niagara Falls as it pours over the dam.



Route 86/43 turns into Main Street and runs straight into downtown Joplin, a city of 41,175. Incorporated in 1873, Joplin has a big-city feel, complete with empty storefronts and graffiti. But the downtown area also includes eight buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, and there's a lot of renovation going on, too.

A tucked-away treasure is the Thomas Hart Benton Mural, which hangs over the council chamber doorway in the City of Joplin Municipal Building, 303 E. Third St. "Joplin At The Turn of the Century, 1896-1906" was dedicated in 1973 on the city's 100th birthday. The 5-1/2-foot-by-14-foot mural depicts "the young booming city of Joplin" and "what made it boom," said Benton, who began his artistic career as a cartoonist at the *Joplin American* newspaper in 1906.

As fascinating as the mural itself is "Evolution of a Mural," the lobby exhibit about it. You'll see Benton's correspondence about the mural, early sketches, scale drawings and even a rare clay model, hand-sculpted by Benton for light and color studies. It was the artist's last large-scale work, completed at age 82.

Joplin's mining heritage is well documented at the Dorothea B. Hoover Historical Museum and the Everett J. Ritchie Tri-State Mineral Museum, both at Fourth Street and Schifferdecker Avenue. The former features period rooms, a delightful miniature circus and a huge doll collection. The latter houses one of the world's finest collections of lead and zinc ore, plus historic mining equipment and tools.



"Joplin At The Turn of the Century, 1896-1906," by Thomas Hart Benton

From the museums, take Route 43 north to Business Route 71 east to Webb City, which, like Neosho, has a couple of nicknames: the City of Flags and the Zinc City. On the right you'll see

Miner's Park and if you look up, you'll see the Praying Hands.

Complete with creepy veins and fingernails, the huge concrete hands are the creation of artist Jack Dawson, who, as a 20-year old college student in 1971, got permission from the Webb City Park Board and Historical Society to sculpt the piece "as a reminder of the simple but profound act of prayer." The steel understructure covered with metal lath, built in Dawson's backyard, was lifted by crane to its flagstone pedestal in 1972. The 32-foot-high, 100-ton hands were completed and dedicated in April 1974.

The spiritual component of the journey continues in Carthage, just a few miles east of Joplin, at a place some consider the collectors' Mecca: Precious Moments Chapel Center. Just follow the signs to Chapel Hill Road off Route HH on the south side of town. Although millions of people around the



Inside the Chapel at Precious Moments

world collect figurines, jewelry, stationery, home décor and much, much more featuring artist Sam Butcher's illustrations of big-eyed children, the complex is not all that easy to find.

But find it they do – in fact, the first thing you notice upon arrival are all the cars from far-flung states parked in the lot. Equally astounding is the size and slickness of the Precious Moments complex, the last thing you'd expect to find in Missouri's Ozark hills.



The Praying Hands in Webb City

Butcher established his empire in southwest Missouri in 1985 and it continues to expand. First stop is the Visitors Center where a bigger-than-life Precious Moments character guides you to the ticket booth (some attractions require a ticket), the restaurants and a gigantic Gift Shoppe. The shoppe is filled with most every household item imaginable bearing Precious Moments characters, and also offers Precious Moments exclusives available nowhere else on earth.

Stick around for a performance by the Precious Moments Singers, daily at noon. Then proceed to the Chapel, featuring 52 murals and 24 stained glass windows depicting Precious Moments kids in Biblical scenes. Other stops include the Fountain of Angels music and light show performed in a 10-story auditorium, the Wedding Island and the Art Museum in the former Butcher home. For those who want to see every precious thing, which could take a couple of days, there's an RV park and hotel on-site, too.

Go back to Route 71 north and you'll hook up with Old Route 66 in Carthage. Head west to 17231 Old 66 Blvd. to the 66 Drive-In, one of only six remaining drive-ins on Route 66. A film-cutting marked the 1998 grand reopening of this 1949 landmark, which was lovingly restored from the silver screen to



The Jasper County Courthouse at night

the neon marquee to the glass-block ticket booth. The 66 shows first-run feature films on weekends. Adults are \$5, kids 12 and under are \$1 and little ones are free.

Follow Old 66 Boulevard east into Carthage. Along the way you'll pass a remarkable Art Deco structure, the Boots Motel. Opened in 1939, the motor-court-style motel is still in business. It may not be luxurious, but legend has it Clark Gable stayed in Room 6.

Continue east to downtown Carthage and prepare to be dazzled by the remarkable

Jasper County Courthouse, completed in 1895. Designed by Maximilian A. Orlopp Jr. of New Orleans, the courthouse is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Outside, this fine example of Romanesque Revival architecture made of Carthage stone is a castle-like riot of turrets, towers and arches. Inside is a functioning wrought-iron cage elevator and displays of military artifacts and mining specimens.

Surrounding the courthouse is Historic Carthage Square, featuring an eclectic array of architectural styles from 1880 through 1910. Also listed on National Register of Historic Places, the square features specialty boutiques, restaurants, antique shops and an old-fashioned five-and-dime. Along the square is the Battle of Carthage Civil War Museum, 205 Grant St., which houses artifacts, period costumes, and a mural and miniature diorama of the Battle of Carthage, which took place July 5, 1861. About 50 visitors stop by the museum daily, in conjunction with a visit to the Battle of Carthage State Historic Site on E. Chestnut Road on the eastern edge of town.

Carthage was the site of the first full-scale land battle of the Civil War after the Union Congress declared war on the South (Bull Run occurred 16 days later). The 12-hour





One of many 19th century mansions in Carthage



Harry S Truman Birthplace State Historic Site in Lamar

battle began north of town at 4 a.m. Missouri Gov. Claiborne Fox Jackson commanded 6,000 hastily recruited Missouri State Guardsmen, and Col. Franz Sigel led 1,100 well armed German-American volunteers from St. Louis. After a fierce artillery duel, the outnumbered Union troops were forced to retreat to avoid being trapped by Confederate cavalry. Interpretive displays at the site describe the troop movements. A reenactment is scheduled for May 2-4, 2003.

Jasper County was devastated at the end of the Civil War. However, in time Carthage emerged as the agricultural and social center of southwest Missouri. The town attracted a wide range of industries, but nearby limestone, lead and zinc deposits created the real wealth. In fact, by the end of the 19th century, more millionaires per capita lived in Carthage than any other city in the nation, according to a Carthage Chamber of Commerce brochure. These wealthy families built lavish homes along Grant, Howard, Oak and Chestnut streets, which you can see on the Victorian Homes Driving Tour. Cruising past the Classic Revivals and Queen Annes, Italian villas and French chateaux, Eastlakes, Georgians and Romanesques, it's easy to imagine elegant couples emerging from horse-drawn carriages in days gone by.

Jump on Route 71 north and enjoy an easy drive through farmland and prairie to Lamar. Follow the signs to the Harry S Truman Birthplace State Historic Site, the humble white-frame home on Truman Street, where

the 33rd president of the United States, and the only Missourian ever elected president, was born on May 8, 1884. (Q: Why is there no period after the "S"? A: Because Truman's grandfathers' names both started with S, and Martha Truman, Harry's mother, was not inclined to make waves.)

Truman spent the first 11 months of his life in this house, which contains four downstairs rooms and two upstairs, plus a smokehouse, well and outhouse in the backyard. It has no electricity and no indoor plumbing, and its modest furnishings are typical of the period when the Trumans lived there.

About 28,000 people annually visit the site and Visitors Center across the street, says Site Administrator Pam Myers. The home is catching up in popularity with the Truman Library in Independence, she notes.

"We're becoming the destination for many Truman fans," Myers says, adding the site is on a Trivial Pursuit card and in a Jeopardy question, too.

Head 16 miles west on Route 160 through scenic wheat fields to Liberal, and follow the signs to Prairie State Park, 128 NW 150th Lane. You'll pass natural areas of prairie flora as well as signs that read, "Bison roaming freely! Stay in car!"



Bison roam freely at Prairie State Park

PHOTOGRAPHS THIS PAGE TOP LEFT BY PAM DROOG; TOP RIGHT, BOTTOM AND OPPOSITE PAGE BY MIKE WRIGHT.

At the Visitors Center, Naturalist Cyndi Evans explains, “The bison like to hang out here. They like to scratch themselves on the signs and eat the fresh grass and put their noses up to the windows.”

Mud blobs on the panes and footprints on the sidewalks prove her point. The problem may get worse, since about 25 of the park’s 76 bison recently had calves. About 36 elk live here, too, as well as prairie chickens and other prairie-dwellers, including the southern plains skink and many insect species found nowhere else in the state. More than 150 bird species have been sighted here.



Established in 1980, the 3,702-acre park is Missouri’s largest remaining tallgrass prairie landscape. More than 13 million acres of tallgrass prairie once covered Missouri; today only 65,000 acres remain, scattered in small sites. Visitors can learn a lot through the interpretive displays at the center, or by hiking the four trails. Early morning or late evening are the best times to hike, to truly appreciate the vastness of the prairie, and the uniqueness of Missouri’s southwest corner.

Until next time, may your destinations be exciting and the journeys to them eye-opening. ■

Pam Droog is editor of Pathways and an outreach specialist at MoDOT General Headquarters.

People *in motion*

continued from page 9



Scott Jordan plots the ARAN’S route.

“We want to be constantly collecting data or we’re defeating the purpose of the van.”

Patrick Kennedy

the calibrations,” Kennedy says. “We take advantage of downtime. We have too much to do to just watch TV in a motel.”

Favorite Part of the Job: “Our job is an adventure!” Kennedy says. “We have a really beautiful state so it’s fun to travel and meet different people.”

Jordan enjoyed traveling more before his daughter was born.

“Now what I like best is working with the computers and video,” he says.

Least Favorite Part: Although they’ve never had an accident, Kennedy says, “When you take an expensive piece of equipment like the ARAN down a city street it’s very stressful because someone could do \$100,000 damage in an instant. But safety is big with us. We’re careful to protect the taxpayers’ investment.”

Also, “everything is recorded!” Jordan notes. “It’s like people are constantly watching us, but they’re a week behind.”

After Hours: Kennedy recently purchased and is now remodeling his grandfather’s farm near Dixon. He also “fools around with” and sells Camaros and Firebirds.

When he’s not hunting deer or turkey, or preparing customers’ trophies at Jordan Taxidermy in New Bloomfield, Jordan relaxes with his wife, Cindy, and daughter, Kaci, 2.

Parting Words: After spending so much time together in the ARAN, Jordan and Kennedy surely must be good friends.

“We tolerate each other,” Kennedy says, with a laugh. ■

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Patrick Kennedy adjusts the ARAN’s extendable wings.